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Festschrift: For Gary Snyder's 60th Birthday

The First Two Times We Met

I must have read The Dharma Bums as soon as the paperback came out in October, 1959, because it was in my mind when I found myself in Japan in January of 1960. It was mainly because the Ryoanji rock garden was described briefly in that book that I decided to take a day off from my work in Tokyo to go visit it in Kyoto.

Like, I suppose, everyone else who read Kerouac's novel, I wished, after reading it, that my life had brought me next to his character Japhy Ryder at some point, or to someone like him. It didn't seem likely that there was anyone else much like him, though it was obvious that Kerouac was describing a real person. I had even read his name in some review, though I couldn't have recalled it.

I wasn't in Japan that winter as a dharma bum. My paycheck came from the RAND Corporation, which got most of its money for research on national security from the U.S. Air Force. At the moment I was on loan to a project run by the Office of Naval Research, advising the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) on problems of the command and control of nuclear weapons.

A particular task I had set myself was to find out the ways that individuals who were in a position to launch nuclear weapons, directly or by sending out orders, might be able to start a nuclear war on their own. There were quite a few such ways and people, I was discovering. The next question was how to change the system so that this couldn't happen.

It seemed to me a very urgent problem, almost entirely secret from the public (both things, despite my efforts, are still true). In pursuing it, I had been talking to atomic control officers all over the Pacific, at alert strips in Okinawa and Korea, in command posts of the Seventh Fleet at sea in Taiwan, in underground headquarters in Hawaii and, now, in Japan.

I was working conscientiously, obsessively as is my nature, with no time out for sightseeing. The one daytime exception, up till then, was my pilgrimage, one Saturday, to the Zen monastery in Kyoto.

After looking at the rocks in the raked sand at Ryoanji I walked back a couple of miles to my hotel in the early evening. Most of the way, I found, was lined with very small hostess bars, each one with a different, perfectly crafted national decor: a tiny German bierstube next to a French bistro next to an English pub, each one with just four or five bar stools inside with gorgeous hostesses on one or two of them.

It was like nothing in America at the end of the Fifties. What this district of Kyoto held out to an adult male (an oxymoron, especially in that era) was as exotic to my eyes as the Ryoanji garden where my walk started. It was a pleasure just to open the

doors as I passed and look in, which was all I felt I had time to do, if I were to see them all.

Then I opened the door on a room like a beerhall that was quite large and not fancy, unlike all the others. A lot of people, nearly all Japanese, were sitting at tables drinking beer or eating. The only unusual thing here was the waitresses, a dozen or so ordinary-looking Japanese women wearing nothing at all but transparent shortie nightgowns. I decided to go in.

I sat at a table by myself and looked around. At a booth at the side of the room two bearded Americans in jeans were sitting with some Japanese, drinking beer. When they saw me looking at the menu, which was in Japanese, one of them, a huge man with a big beard, came over to ask if he could help me. He gave my order to a waitress in good Japanese, and suggested that I join his friends.

They made space for me on a bench, ordered more beer and introduced themselves. The two Americans seemed both about my age (I was almost 29). The one who had brought me over, Bob Strickland, was making a living teaching English in Kyoto; in the States he had been, among other things, a member of the motorcycle gang Hell's Angels.

The other, looking much smaller next to Bob and with a short, neatly trimmed beard, spoke very quietly and I didn't get his name over the noise in the room. Later I picked up that he was taking a weekend off from a monastery where he was studying Zen. I asked him his name again and he put out his hand and said, "Gary Snyder."

It sounded slightly familiar. I asked him where I might have heard it. He asked, "Do you read poetry?" I said I did, and thought for a moment, and the name I had forgotten came, improbably, back to me. I looked hard at him and said, "You're Japhy Ryder." He nodded. I said, "You're the reason I'm in Kyoto."

He looked exactly as he was supposed to. In fact, marvelously, he turned out to be very much as Kerouac had described him.

We drank beer and talked for a long time that evening, mostly listening to Strickland's tales of Hell's Angels and his equally hair-raising experiences afterwards as a reposessor of property for nonpayment of loans (a "Repo Man").

The next morning Bob called my hotel and said that Gary had invited us to spend the day with him at his place outside town. I rode on the back of his motorcycle, out past ricefields, to a Japanese cottage where Gary lived when he wasn't at the monastery.

There was a new motorcycle in the small yard in front, bought, Gary told me, with earnings from a recent tour in the merchant marine. Inside, the house, with bamboo walls and tatami mats, was immaculate. There were no chairs. One room, a sort of library where Gary worked, kneeling or sitting crosslegged before a low reading table, made a strong impression on me. It had books lining three walls: one wall of books in English--largely archeology, anthropology and poetry--another wall of books in Japanese, the third, Chinese.

We sat or stretched out on the tatami mats and talked all day and into the night. A couple of times Gary cooked us Japanese meals. There was a young Japanese student, evidently a disciple of Gary's, visiting from Tokyo. He told me that Gary was very well known among Tokyo students as a pacifist, as well as a poet.

In this company I was a pretty exotic figure myself, to put it politely. They didn't get many chances to meet a live, walking representative of the military-industrial complex, and I looked like the real thing.

I had been a Marine company commander just a few years before, and I still had close-cropped hair, cordovan shoes, and my green nylon Marine raincoat, with an expensive camera and a Rolex watch from a Navy PX. I was an employee of the RAND Corporation, on Defense Department contract working for CINCPAC.

They were surprised--Gary told me later--to be getting on with me so well, considering what I did for a living, i.e., who I worked for. Strictly speaking, they didn't know what I did, since I couldn't tell them. I didn't tell secrets to the public in those days, and there are few secrets more closely held than the details of nuclear operations that bear on the risks of nuclear war by accident, false alarm or unauthorized action.

Instead, we argued about pacifism. I wanted to see if Gary could convince me of the compelling nature of absolute pacificism (no one ever has, totally, though I am still listening, from a position that gets ever closer) and he came as near as anyone.

I recognized a very subtle arguer; but it so happened that I knew the dialectics of this issue unusually well from many debates with a pacifist friend at Harvard, Everett Mendelsohn, and I found that I knew counters to Gary's line of argument that he was evidently unused to hearing.

Several times he went suddenly silent after I had made an unfamiliar point. His young Japanese disciple was very struck by this; at one point when Gary was off making tea, he told me admiringly, "I've never seen anyone stop him like that before."

I took what satisfaction I could from that, because I had already sized up my host that day as--something I was not used to feeling--a better man than I was. His life was more together. I was as smart as he was, but he was wise.

That was an unsettling thing to find in someone who was almost exactly the same age; he was less than a year older, but he seemed to me very much my senior. I could easily imagine taking him, like the Japanese student and apparently many others, as a teacher.

We had some things in common, more than he may have realized then. I had, then as now, a passionate obsession with preventing nuclear weapons from being used by anyone ever again that he probably would have respected if he had known it.

But he matched the intensity we shared, and the taste for adventure, with a composure, a capacity for sudden calm, a deepness of vision that I lacked. And to an extraordinary degree, he was in charge of his own life.

I had never met anyone like him. I felt, more than envy, glad that I had had a chance to discover him, to find this particular model of the way that a life could be lived.

After many tales--"There's a lot of funny stories to be told," he commented late that night after my account, rarely shared, of the surreal circumstances of my loss of virginity in Laramie, Wyoming--he gave us blankets and we went to sleep on the tatami. The next morning he said goodbye warmly and threw us out, saying he had to work.

I went back to Tokyo to my own work, to the investigation of inadvertent nuclear war that I hadn't discussed in Kyoto. It was on that trip that I had discovered, among other things, that President Eisenhower had delegated the authority to use nuclear weapons in a crisis to commanders like CINCPAC in case communications were out with Washington (as happened, on the average, part of every day).

I also learned that month that the Navy, without the knowledge of civilian authorities in Japan or, possibly, in the US, were storing nuclear weapons in the tidal waters of Japan, on an the Marine base of Iwakuni, in violation of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty which was signed that year (despite mass demonstrations against it).

Gary and his friends in Tokyo would have been quite interested. God knows, I didn't dream of telling them. It might have had a better effect than what I did do. That included telling Kennedy's Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy the next year.

Otherwise, I kept the secrets, even when McNamara and Bundy chose, rather than to upset the military, not to do anything with the information: which was easier for them to decide so long as Congress, the public and our allies were kept in the dark--by me, among others. Thus the delegation of nuclear authority persisted, and the nuclear weapons ship stayed moored in Japanese waters.

So it went, in my work in the Sixties. I uncovered flaws in secret government operations, informed my bosses--up to the Secretary of Defense, sometimes the President--and gave recommendations: then collaborated in keeping it all secret from the public and Congress. It was a process that made me feel useful, but--because of the last step--had no useful consequence.

When I went to Vietnam in mid-decade, it was more of the same. The difference was that the shortcomings I was finding in secret policies were killing people every day, and threatening to kill a lot more. In the terms of Gary's path, it was not Right Livelihood.

I didn't hear that from Gary; I didn't see him or hear from him again in the Sixties. Still, my memory of him that weekend stayed with me in the back of my mind as a kind of touchstone: an image of an alternative way of living. But doing it his way--deciding on my own to speak truth to the world--still lay some years off for me.

Three more people, among others, helped me reach that point. The first one, Patricia, I married: though not all at once. She came to be with me in Saigon, twice, and the second time we were engaged. But she gave me a hard time about my association with the war.

She took me to see refugee camps around Saigon--where people lived in a swamp of mud and sewage, fleeing the American bombing in the countryside--and managed to convey the feeling that I shared responsibility for all of this: although she knew that I had opposed the bombing, bureaucratically, both in the North and the South from the beginning.

"How can you be part of this?" she cried at me in fury one fatal night, when a Canadian just back from North Vietnam described the effects of the bombing of the North.

"You know that I'm against the bombing," I remember answering, writhing under her attack; "I'm trying to stop it...you talk as if I'm partly to blame for everything."

She was right, of course, as I realized much later; but at the time I wasn't able to see that, and it felt unfair. Finally I couldn't take it any more; I broke the engagement in the summer of

'66 and we didn't see each other again for three years, the first of which I remained in Vietnam.

I came back in mid-'67 determined to see the war ended: but still not clear there were better ways to do that than to work from inside, counselling Presidential advisors and candidates, in secret. Among other things, I worked, with others, on a Top Secret history and analysis of US decisionmaking in Vietnam, initially for Secretary of Defense McNamara.

Then I met two other bodhisattvas: in 1968, an Indian woman named Janaki Tschannerl; in August 1969, a young American, Randy Kehler, on his way to prison for noncooperation with the draft. Their way was Gandhian, not Zen Buddhist; but they were both a lot like Gary in their way of being and in the impression they made on me.

Between them--and the books that Janaki led me to, by Martin Luther King, Barbara Deming, Gandhi--they converted me, not to the absolute pacifism they shared with Gary, but to Gandhian nonviolent action, satyagraha: in particular, truthfulness, Gandhi's "truth force."

By the end of September, 1969, I had decided not to let a security classification on truths the public needed to know keep me any longer from conveying them. My friend Tony Russo--who had been fired from RAND earlier when he started writing truthful reports about torture and the use of herbicides in Vietnam--had a woman friend with a Xerox machine.

With their help, I started copying the 7000 Top Secret pages of the McNamara study in hopes that they would be released in the Senate or elsewhere that fall. I expected that soon after that, I would have to go to prison for the rest of my life.

In early November, Patricia arrived to visit me--we had gotten back in touch that summer, after three years--just as I had decided to go to Washington to offer the first batch of documents to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I invited her to come with me--without telling her why I was really going--and we've been together since that day.

A month later--just twenty years ago, as I write this--I proposed to her again. She didn't accept right away, but before she finally did I told her what I was doing and what I faced, and she soon became, what she has been ever since, my partner, as well as my lover and closest friend.

In the language of my trial: she is my unindicted co-conspirator. (Years later, when we were being booked together for an antinuclear arrest, she remarked that she had never been fingerprinted before; I finally figured out why she had never been

indicted for copying and distributing the Pentagon Papers, which had her prints all over them). We married in August of 1970, just before we were to move from California to the East Coast.

But the Pentagon Papers--as the McNamara study came to be known after I gave it to the New York Times in the spring of 1971--didn't come out right away. Senator Fulbright, to whom I gave the documents between November, 1969 and the following spring, finally backed off in mid-70 from his assurances that he would hold hearings and release the study in defiance of the Administration.

In September of 1970 Patricia and I were staying in Big Sur for a few days before flying to Boston. I had a copy of the Pentagon Papers, still unreleased, in our bags in the trunk of our rented car.

I didn't know how or when I would get them out, hence when I would go to prison. There were just a few people I especially wanted to see again before that happened. Randy Kehler was one; I managed to visit him in La Tuna Prison before the Papers came out and tell him what I was planning. Janaki was another. And, it came to me, Gary Snyder.

When I heard from someone in Big Sur that he was living in Marin, north of San Francisco, I felt like reporting in to him. Patricia, a nature mystic and a meditator, was as eager to see him as I was.

He was said not to have a phone, but we had an address and directions. We drove to Sausalito, located the compound--where Alan Watts had lived--on top of a hill...and found the place deserted. Finally someone appeared and told us that Gary had moved away: to Nevada City, wherever that was. Nevada? All they could tell us was a P.O. box on "Alleghany Star Route."

We had detoured a long way for nothing. We were driving, disconsolately, down a narrow road from the hilltop when we had to pull over to let a tall truck pass. On an impulse I called out to the driver--the cab towered above us so I couldn't see his face---if by any chance he knew where Nevada City was.

A voice called down, "Who you looking for?" I said, "Gary Snyder." Without any pause, or comment, an arm extended down from the cab holding a piece of paper. I took it, and found myself looking at a hand-drawn map, in ink, showing detailed directions from the hill we were on to a location in the Sierra foothills with an X marked "Gary Snyder's house."

It was eerie. I heard the voice say, "Just got back from there." The arm went back in the cab and the truck pulled away.

We stared at the map, looked at each other... evidently we were meant to go to Nevada City.

Eventually we found ourselves at the end of a forest road, close to the X on the map. We got out, followed the sound of voices down a path through the trees and came to a clearing where people were eating lunch at a rough table, next to the foundations of a house.

Gary was sitting at the table. He came toward us as we left the car; he looked unfriendly. They didn't like visitors, he said. They'd been getting too many.

I introduced myself hastily, reminding him of our meeting ten years earlier; I realized that there was no great reason he would remember it. But he said that he remembered it very well; he was glad to see me again. He had liked me a lot, he told me later, though he didn't agree with me and didn't like what I was working for.

As we talked about the war over lunch, it got through to him that some changes had occurred, and the warmth he was already showing grew more intimate. Meanwhile, he was just about exactly the way I remembered him; I was still just as taken with him.

By the time we had to leave, I wanted to give him some indication of what I was doing now. I told him I was involved in an action that had to do with putting out information about the war, about secret decisionmaking and lies. It might be big, I said. But it would probably mean that I would be put away for quite a while. (My indictment, the next year, posed a maximum sentence of 115 years). I thought he would be interested to see the information when it came out; he agreed.

I didn't show him any papers from the trunk, so as not to implicate him; but I hinted that he was implicated anyway, in the process of my awakening. I wanted to thank him.

We weren't eager to leave the forest, but we had to get to the airport. He urged us to come back and visit him when his house was finished. We did, years later, after the trial.